

Teaching the Emergence of the Islamic World through Art and Architecture: A Lesson in Cross-Cultural Exchange [Figure 1]

Frequently in the world history classroom we teach the emergence of the Islamic World and the expanding *dar al-Islam* via dramatic maps and dates of the “Arab Conquest.” [Figure 2] Yet such visuals alone can leave students with a woefully incomplete and misleading understanding of the emergence of the Muslim world -- an image, perhaps, of devastation and carnage as the Arabs swept away existing societies. Indeed, the early Arab forces were an ad-hoc collection of feuding clans fighting each other on the Syrian border where they encountered, and defeated, local Byzantine troops. Emboldened by their victory, the Arab tribes quickly unified and pushed the Byzantine army out of Syria and North Africa. The Sasanid empire fell next. The dates are awe-inspiring: between 633 and 637, the Muslims seized Syria and Palestine, and took most of Mesopotamia from the Sasanids. In 651 they added Persia to their realm. By 718, northwest Africa and the Iberian peninsula fell to the Muslims and the *dar al-Islam* now stretched from India and the central Asian steppes in the east to Africa and Iberia in the west.¹ But leaving this visual of incredibly successful military victories tells only one part of a much broader story: the birth of the Muslim world built on the cooperation and participation of the subjugated peoples. The initial Arab conquests were, in fact, rarely destructive.² One of the main reasons for the Arab’s early success was due to the aid they received from disgruntled populations in the Byzantine and Sasanid empires: the Copts in Egypt, the Monophysites in Syria, and the Nestorians in Persia. Moreover, the new rulers were quickly able to consolidate their additional territories precisely because the local populations willingly accepted the Arab regime.³ This is further evidenced in the

innovative art and architecture that emerged as local craftsmen and builders set to work creating an Islamic milieu for their new overlords. Thus, a visual depiction of the unique modes of art and architecture that emerged under the Umayyad caliphs (632-750) portrays an alternate and more complete view of the Arab conquests and its aftermath: the birth of an era of intensive intercultural exchange as diverse populations collaborated and cooperated to create the expanding *dar al-Islam*.

As the Arabs secured and migrated into their expanding territories, they encountered new artistic forms from the Greco-Roman, Byzantine, Persian, and Coptic cultures as well as the indigenous traditions of the Berbers, Slavs, Goths, Turks and Africans. Under the Umayyad caliphs, the Muslims at once set about integrating the art and architectural styles of their subjects into new works that embodied developing Islamic principles and themes.⁴ The Arabs arrived with few artistic prototypes as they settled in their new territories. Noted Islamic art and architecture scholar Oleg Grabar remarks that, “the living architecture of Central Arabia was not an impressive one.”⁵ Even the aristocrats of Mecca lived in mud brick simple structures, and Muhammad and his early followers prayed outdoors in his courtyard. The largest religious sanctuary the Arabs possessed, the Ka’ba in Mecca, was a simple wooden rectangular structure that lacked windows and doors. [Figure 3] Its only ornamentation was the custom of draping the sanctuary with multicolored textiles -- a visible sign of wealth in Mecca. Textiles and expensive objects in Mecca arrived from elsewhere, usually Syria, Egypt and occasionally Ethiopia. As a result, the Arabs initially borrowed the artistic expressions of their subjects as they attended to the business of fashioning a nascent Islamic empire -- primarily relying on the craftsmanship and engineering capabilities of the Byzantine Greeks. Nonetheless, the

works that materialized were unique because they served an original purpose and function.

The early Muslim stance toward representational art reflected the Arabs inherent lack of any sort of figurative tradition. The idols and paintings that decorated the Ka'ba, including paintings of the Virgin and Child as well as Abraham, were foreign imports; to the Arabs "the image was never a natural means of expression" states Islamic art historian Wijdan Ali.⁶ Consequently, the Qur'an itself states very little about a Muslim's proper attitude toward art or human representations aside from the several passages that clearly oppose the adoration of physical idols (5:90 and 6:74). Most likely "during the time of the Prophet," asserts Grabar, "the problem of artistic creativity and representations simply did not come up as a significant question requiring some sort of pronouncement or legislation."⁷ Yet several Arab authors of the eight and ninth centuries reported that when Muhammad ordered the destruction of all the idols and the defacement of the paintings inside the Ka'ba, he personally protected the image of the Virgin and the infant Jesus and preserved the painting of Abraham.⁸ Early Muslims interpreted Muhammad's actions as an injunction against idolatry, but they also understood that representative painting was acceptable and had its place as long as it did not serve as a means of idolatry. The Arab Muslim regime from its very beginnings embraced aniconism, the prohibition of depicting the image of God since God's essence could never be recreated in an image and to prevent images from ever becoming objects of idol worship.⁹ Representational art was avoided in places of worship to discourage idolatry, but were quite acceptable in the secular sphere. In fact, the Turks, Persians, and Indian Muslims who, unlike the Arabs, brought with them a rich traditional of pictorial

art, frequently depicted Muhammad in scenes from his life in their illustrated manuscripts.¹⁰ [Figures 4 and 5]. After the 16th century, however, these non-Arab artists depicted Muhammad with a white veil over his face and later refrained from a literal depiction of the Prophet as the spiritual aspect of Islamic art evolved. [Figure 6].

The earliest examples of the initial modes of intercultural exchange among Arabs and their subjects appear in the first coins minted by the Umayyad caliphs. At first Muslim coinage plainly mimicked Byzantine and Sasanian prototypes. [Figure 7]. Note the 7th century Byzantine prototype of the Muslim coin struck by caliph Abd al-Malik (685-705). But on the bottom row you see that initial imitation evolved into an Islamic style as evidenced in the coins issued by caliph Abd al-Malik (685-705). [Figure 8]. Here the coins initially depicted the figure of a ruler, yet later al-Malik removed the ruler's image and used only language from the Qu'ran. By replacing images of rulers with Qu'ranic verses, the Arab caliphs emphasized that the Islamic Empire was governed by God rather than humans.

The blending of Arab tastes and Islamic sensibilities with local populations culminated in the first major monument in Muslim history: the Dome of the Rock which was completed in Jerusalem in 692. The location of the Dome was a site that for centuries had been associated with Herod's Temple -- an enormous Jewish complex systematically destroyed by Roman armies who replaced it with a shrine to Jupiter. [Figure 10]. Christians claimed that the ruined area was the site of the martyrdom of St. James and St. Stephen and also the location of one of the temptations of Christ among other legends. On this ruined site there stood a rock with an artificial opening that perhaps was associated with a Jewish -- or an even earlier -- religious practice.¹¹

Christians and Muslims both used the area as a quarry for their building projects. At the time of the conquest Umar (634-644), the second caliph, appropriated this vicinity for the Arabs, and sixty years later, for reasons not entirely clear, the fifth caliph Abd al-Malik built a dome over the rock.¹²

The Dome of the Rock is not a mosque, but a shrine above a sacred place. Although scholars are unsure or disagree of the meaning of the Dome at the time of its construction, it is clear that the monument was conceived as a work of art meant to glorify Islam in a city filled with impressive Christian churches and monuments. Unlike Jerusalem's Christian structures, the Dome was designed to be seen from all directions as a visible symbol of Muslim presence. [Figure 11]. Moreover, by appropriating Jewish and Christian holy space, the Dome asserted the primacy of Islam over previous monotheistic traditions. Nonetheless, scholars argue that "Christianity and Judaism were somehow involved in shaping the original perceptions of the Dome of the Rock."¹³

The model for the Dome of the Rock was derived from Roman, Christian and Byzantine architecture. The tomb of Diocletian c. 303 AD became the model for Christian baptisteries and churches. [Figure 11]. Prominent in Jerusalem, the dome appeared in the rotunda around the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the octagonal Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives, and the Tomb of the Virgin in the Kidron valley. The exact circumference of the octagonal floor plan of the Dome of the Rock is identical to the Byzantine Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna completed in 548. [Figures 12, 13 and 14]. Indeed, the Arab rulers contracted Byzantine craftsmen and engineers to design and build this Muslim monument alongside Arab builders and designers. Like its Byzantine model, the Dome of the Rock's octagonal plan includes a two-story

ambulatory enclosing a central space beneath a great cupola embellished with mosaics. [Figure 15]. It is quite apparent, however, that the mosaic designs are vastly different from its Christian counterpart; the Dome of the Rock utilizes calligraphy and botanical motifs to impart its spiritual message rather than images. [Figure 16 and 17].

Nonetheless, Oleg Grabar argues that although the “spirit and content” of the inscriptions that adorn the Dome of the Rock are quite different Christian works, the “idea of incorporating writing within the ornamental scheme of a monument... especially with respect to mosaic inscriptions” is nonetheless a continuation of Greco-Roman traditions.¹⁴ [Figure 18]. Furthermore, even the placement of the Quranic inscriptions follow a similar pattern in Christian and Jewish liturgies which begin by praising God’s uniqueness and power followed by his universal mercy.¹⁵ They are followed as well by a reference to the monument’s patron and Grabar remarks that, “Christian and occasionally Jewish litanies also invoke the ruling prince.”¹⁶ The passages selected from the Qur’an emphasize eschatological themes and especially praise for God and his prophet Muhammad who is also an intercessor for humankind. They also stress praise for Jesus who is also a prophet but not God’s “son” or an intercessor. Although the messages clearly suit Muslim purposes, scholars speculate that the inscriptions were also chosen with Christians in mind to teach them the truth about Jesus.

Yet the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock are entirely unique and Grabar notes that “no other monument with comparable decoration exists or has been recorded.”¹⁷ Jewel toned botanical motifs, vegetative patterns of fruits and flowers, and even displays of actual jewels such as bracelets, necklaces, tiaras, and brooches adorn the arches of the interior. [Figures 19 and 20]. Most of the artisans were Christians and some designs

reflect local traditions, yet others reflect a Persian and Coptic influence.¹⁸ In its entirety, therefore, the Dome of the Rock is more than a powerful symbol of Muslim presence and dominance. [Figure 21]. Its art and architecture clearly symbolize the intercultural exchange that occurred among Persians, Greeks, Copts, and Arabs during the Umayyad caliphate and the structure is a testament to one of Islam's most distinctive traits: "unity within diversity."¹⁹

In Damascus as well as Jerusalem, Greco-Roman architecture inspired the architectural design for Caliph al-Walid's (705-715) Great Mosque of Damascus. [Figure 22]. After Muslims entered Damascus in 635 and declared the city the capital of the Umayyad caliphate, the local Christians agreed to share their church dedicated to St. John the Baptist with the new Muslim population. For many years, both faiths peacefully prayed together under the same roof.²⁰ But when the Muslim population exceeded that of the Christians, the caliph constructed a mosque on the site. Nonetheless, the new mosque retained the former church's prized relic, the head of St. John, and even today both Christians and Muslims pay tribute to the saint at a central location in the mosque. [Figure 23].

Early mosque construction in the first years of the Umayyad caliphate followed the model of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, Muhammad's home where he and the first Muslim community congregated for daily prayers.²¹ The large rectangle prayer hall of the Damascus mosque may rest on reused Roman columns, but the Arabs introduced horizontally placed aisles rather than the vertical aisles found in the Byzantine Christian churches in order to accommodate the specific prayer needs of Muslims. This Arab innovation of a large prayer hall created an entirely new architectural form without Greek

or Roman precedents.²² The hall also opened into an expansive courtyard where the faithful could perform ablutions in the fountains before entering the mosque in imitation of the Prophet's courtyard in Medina. [Figure 24]. The Arabs also incorporated the horseshoe and the pointed arch to the traditional Roman design.

Yet the Great Mosque of Damascus also contained elements of Greek, Roman, and local Syrian traditions into the new Islamic space.²³ The walls of the prayer hall, the façade and the columns of the courtyard were covered with intricate glass mosaics of trees, cities, plants, rivers, waterfalls, castles and flowers – all reflecting the local Syrian traditional and created by Byzantine craftsmen sent from Constantinople.²⁴ [Figure 25 and 26]. The Great Mosque of Damascus was also one of the first mosques to introduce the features that subsequently became the standard for all future mosques: the *mihrab* (the recess in the wall that points to the direction of Mecca), *minbar* (high pulpit with stairs for the imam to deliver his sermon), *minara* (minaret) and *maqsurah* (an enclosure reserved for the caliph).

The innovative features of the Great Mosque of Damascus largely shaped the design of the Great Mosque of Cordoba built by the Umayyad caliph of Spain Abd al-Rahman I (756-788) between 706 and 716. [Figure 27]. Although the Cordoba mosque borrowed heavily from its Syrian predecessor, local influences led to the creation of a distinctly new form and the use of the horseshoe arch reached its zenith. Instead of the Byzantine and Persian inspired mosaics found in the Dome of the Rock or the Great Mosque of Damascus, here local craftsmen used a combination of stone, marble, and brick to create an original style of abstract arabesques as well as calligraphy.²⁵ [Figure 28]. The dome shaped shell that covered the *mihrab* came from Visigoth origins and

unique to this mosque.²⁶ [Figure 29]. The builders reused columns and capitals from classical ruins in Spain and North Africa, but introduced an entirely new architectural design by raising the height of the building by erecting two tiers of arches: the lower supported by the columns and the upper by long and narrow piers.²⁷ [Figure 30]. Add the local Spanish contribution of alternating white stone with red brick as well the addition of interlocking arches, and the effect was an entirely unique art and architectural form. [Figure 31].

Introducing students to the emergence of Islam and the expanding Islamic world through its art and architecture is an ideal opportunity to convey one of the world historians' most important tasks: teaching cross-cultural connections that transcend regional boundaries. Moreover, it sheds light on a distinctive characteristic of the early Muslim world -- an era of peaceful collaboration and cooperation among diverse populations. The distinct art forms found in Islamic art also call to attention one of the most important religious tenets of Islam: its unswerving and strict adherence to monotheism as revealed in its core belief that "there is no God but God."

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- ¹ Jerry Bentley and Herbert Ziegler, *Traditions and Encounters* 4th edition. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 353.
- ² Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd edition. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 36. Wijdan Ali, *The Arab Contributions to Islamic Art*. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 21.
- ³ Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies*, 34.
- ⁴ Wijdan Ali, *The Arab Contributions to Islamic Art*, 13.
- ⁵ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 75.
- ⁶ Wijdan Ali, "From the Literal to the Spiritual: The Development of the Prophet Muhammad's Portrayal from 13th Century Ilkhanid Miniatures to 17th Century Ottoman Art." Proceedings of the 11th International Congress of Turkish Art. (Utrecht, The Netherlands: August 23-28, 1999), 9 and reprinted in *EJOS IV*, No 7, 1-24, 2001.
- Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, p. 76; Vernon Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1450*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2004), 20.; Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*. (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006), 313-314. Martin's sources are 8th and 9th century Muslim authors Muhammad ibn 'Umar al-Waqidi and Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Azraqi. Aijdan Ali, 14
- ⁷ Grabar, *Formation*, 80.
- ⁸ Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, 80 and Lings, *Muhammad*, 314.
- ⁹ Wijdan, "From the Literal to the Spiritual," 8-10.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 10. Ali notes that Turkish, Persian, and Indian depictions of Muhammad highlight his Arab ethnicity rather than as Turk, Persian, or Indian, thus acknowledging Islam's Arab roots and significance.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 29.
- ¹² Grabar asserts that, there is no clear-cut indication of Abraham's association with the Rock of Jerusalem at the time of Abd al-Malik" in *Formation*, 54.
- ¹³ Grabar, *Formation*, 80.
- ¹⁴ Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy*, 71.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 65.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Grabar, "The Shape of the Holy," 91.
- ¹⁸ Wijdan Ali, "Islamic Art as a Means of Cultural Exchange." (Manchester, UK: Foundation for Science, Technology, and Civilization, 2006), 4. Also, Ali, *Arab Contributions to Islamic Art*, 26.
- ¹⁹ Ali, *The Arab Contributions to Islamic Art*, 13.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 30.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 22.
- ²³ Ibid., 34.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 33-34.
- ²⁵ Ali, "Islamic Art as a Means of Cultural Exchange," 8-9.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 9.
- ²⁷ Richard Ettinghausen et al, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, 85.